

FIFTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY SERMON NOV 12 2015

No more than thirty, or perhaps only 20 years after Christ's death and resurrection, St Paul wrote the following words to the young church in Galatia:

“For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything!” A new creation is everything.

Paul wrote these words in an oppressive time; a time of unfulfilled promises, of Roman occupation, of a religious establishment increasingly irrelevant to people's needs, and the unhappy weight of centuries of invasion by neighboring countries. Yet those small communities Paul had visited—in Galatia, Corinth, Ephesus, and others were beacons of hope—something NEW.

A new creation, as Paul puts it.

So I thank you so much for being a part of my giving thanks to God for 55 years of ordained ministry! Here's a quick time line of it from ordination to retirement at age 65, in 1996:

- Ordained priest in Boston MA in 1960
- 1963, went with Anne and our year-old son to Puerto Rico, first to a parish in Ponce on the South Coast, then after a year in England, back to Puerto Rico, in San Juan, for six more years as founder and director of Mision Industrial, an ecumenical community org'n.
- 1973, now with three children, we returned to the United States. 1974, moved to Pasadena Ca. to serve at All Saints Church on the staff.
- 1980-85, as a writer and organizer with the Episcopal Church Publishing Company, publisher of The Witness Magazine.
- 1987-96, Vicar of Emmanuel Church in Los Angeles, a bilingual church.

But on this occasion today, I want to share with you my belief in a New Creation. My hope with you today is that you and I, who belong to that body of believers that is the historic Church, may emerge from any “Slough of Despond” [John Bunyan] — to

find that God is far from finished with us—both as individual Christians, and also as the universal Church, the Body of Christ.

As I've reflected in the past few weeks on my years in ministry, it seems as if I've been given three precious gifts, despite my own unworthiness, weaknesses, and anxieties.

First, I've been given a VISION. Second, I somehow found a THEOLOGY that made sense—(as much as theologies can indeed make sense!) And third, I somehow found in my ministry a PRAXIS—an engagement—with people and events in the real world.

SO: Vision----Theology---Praxis. There you have your three points!!

I. So first, the Vision.

Well no, I've had no Isaiah experience of "seeing the Lord",— nor a vision like Paul on the road to Damascus. But I did grow up amongst a wonderful nurturing and affirming Episcopal extended family. I had a great grandmother who founded the Episcopal Church in Marfa, Texas. Growing up in El Paso in the 1930s and 40s I had a sense that the world was somehow God's world. My family was always open to others, including especially Mexicans. As a small child I heard Spanish constantly and spoke a little bit from very early on. "The maid", as we called the hired household help, taught me many household words.

So this too was God's world. And somehow going to church was where things seemed to come together.

Many decades later, Martin Luther King's wonderful sentence "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice" would articulate for me this sense of God's presence and plan. In seminary (Harvard Divinity School) Julian of Norwich's comforting words "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" calmed a soul troubled by the many contradictions of philosophy, theology, and life itself. So hear St Paul's words again: A New Creation! This is the plan!!! It matters more than anything else. That is my Vision statement.

II. A theology.

Entering Harvard Divinity School only 9 months after completing three years' service aboard a Navy destroyer (military service was required during the Korean War), I found myself in courses under the renowned 20th century theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich combined a marvelous appreciation of philosophy and culture with his theology of Being, and his teaching and his compassion for the world seemed to rise far above the conventional pieties of the churches. Here are some of his sayings—inspired by the Galatians passage I opened my remarks with:

- “We all live [even we convinced Christians] in the old state of things...the question asked of us by our text is whether we also participate in the new state of things”ie. A New Creation.
- “In Jesus we look at a human life that maintained the Union [with God] in spite of everything that drove him into separation”.
- “Here and there in the world, and now and then in ourselves there is a New Creation, usually hidden but sometimes manifest...”

So Paul Tillich was an anchor for me. He allows me to be a skeptic, a doubter, and to wallow occasionally in that “slough of despond”, but he pulls me back into being a participant in The New Creation.

My other theological anchor is the Anglican doctrine of The Incarnation.

This is the belief that when God entered the world as a baby in Bethlehem, a megavolt surge of spiritual energy spread throughout the entire universe, and into peoples and nations, cultures and structures of every kind. I.e everything—everything! Is now charged with God's presence. That's the incarnation's meaning. And our job is to go out and respond to this presence—to affirm it, to enhance it, to celebrate it. The Incarnation: Christ is present —everywhere.

So to Part III—the praxis, the engagement.

Here's another quote, this one from the African American theologian Cornel West that is key to me: "Justice is love in action in the public sphere" REPEAT.

Cornel West's quote is a good intro to the urge I found in myself very early on in my ministry, only a few years after my ordination: The desire to understand the world of work. I have tried pretty much ever since my early 30s to insert myself into that aspect of human experience where ordinary people earn their daily bread—namely, their work life. What is the spiritual significance of human work, if any? Does it, or should it contribute to the moral and material wellbeing of the human community? These were the questions I began to ask myself.

To find out, I spent a year in England in 1966 in the industrial north, where the Industrial Revolution began. There was an Anglican program that placed clergy in factories to see and feel first hand, the work experience. The program arose out of the observation that the Church of England had largely lost the working class. So from small garment or textile factories where the din of the machines was unbelievably deafening (causing frequent partial deafness), to a big steel mill in Manchester that made railroad wheels, I spent much time on the factory floor, observing and talking to workers. What I learned there was basically this: that workers are not machines, but living, breathing human beings with families and with aspirations! They deserve dignity and respect.

We Episcopalians should be familiar with those two words: dignity and respect, because of the question we ask of baptismal candidates: "Will you respect the dignity of every human being?"

So out of this experience, and from subsequent ministry in Los Angeles in advocacy for working people, I wrote a book in 1985 called The Human Enterprise: a Christian Perspective on Work.—published by Leaven Press.

Fast forward to 1996, when I officially retired after ten years as vicar of that bilingual church in Los Angeles (with many new immigrants from Mexico and Central America). I was trying to figure out what to do in retirement when I received an invitation to join an interfaith group that was forming –in support of a living wage ordinance for the City of Los Angeles.

So once again, --after my retirement!-- I'm thrust into advocacy for working people's rights. Our interfaith group became part of a really well organized campaign to persuade the Los Angeles City Council to pass the landmark living wage ordinance. After about a year and a half, despite the strong opposition of the business community, and the mayor of Los Angeles, the ordinance passed. The story of the Ghost of Jacob Marley was a big turning point.

Toward the conclusion of the coalition's campaign we staged a dramatic event at Los Angeles City Hall to put public pressure on the mayor to sign the ordinance. With over 200 workers and about 20 clergy of all stripes—including the Episcopal suffragan bishop of Los Angeles—waiting on the City Hall steps, the Ghost of Jacob Marley emerged from an automobile at the curb. He was dressed in ashy gray from head to foot, including makeup, and dragged a ten-foot chain. The ghost led the workers and clergy in solemn procession through the hall and up to the mayor's wing on the second floor. Asking to speak with the mayor, and his request being denied, he then pulled out a statement to read, and began in a loud voice: " Richard!! (the mayor's name) I can't see you, but I know you're in there!. I am the ghost of Jacob Marley, in life the partner of Ebenezer Scrooge, and I've come back to warn you! Do not neglect the poor as we did in our lives, but soften your heart, and give them a living wage!!

The press was there, and next day the Los Angeles Times gave full coverage to the event.

A final story, one that reverts back to the nine years that Anne and I spent in Puerto Rico (from 1963 -1973, with that one year out in England).

I was director and founder of a new ecumenical group, Mision Industrial de Puerto Rico. In early 1970, with strong backing from the Episcopal Church USA and other

denominations, we started building a strong constituency to oppose a proposal by two big US copper companies (Kennecott Copper Co. was one of them) to open copper mining in Puerto Rico. Our group felt that the environmental impact would be very bad, and that the jobs and industry created by the mining would be minimal. But the government of Puerto Rico had been very favorable to the project.

Then in late 1970 came a crucial discovery: mainland churches and the Episcopal Church USA had discovered their investment portfolios had millions of dollars invested in the two copper companies wanting to mine copper.!

Some months later one of the two copper companies held its annual stockholder meeting in New York City at which the Church had filed a stockholder resolution in opposition.

Bishop Reus was allowed by the chair of the meeting to speak against the mining proposal. He had five minutes to speak, and in the midst of his address a stockholder interrupted him loudly from the floor:

“What have Puerto Rico’s problems to do with my money????!!

But the story of the Puerto Rican copper mines subsequently had a happy outcome. Opposition in Puerto Rico had been increasing, thanks to the witness of the churches and other groups there and in the US. A short time later the Puerto Rican government, feeling public opinion turn strongly against the companies’ proposal, began to drag its feet in negotiations. Several months later the copper companies withdrew their offer. No copper mining there has been proposed since.

So here were the churches, including our Episcopal Church as the lead, taking on a huge economic and environmental issue, the mining of copper, and successfully standing up for the environment and for an economic development that would provide good jobs for those who most needed them. This was the Body of Christ writ large in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION:

We are individual Christians, asked to find our way to witness. And we are also the body of Christ, the wider church, called to witness to justice., even in our time— and especially in our time!

MLK: The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

A New Creation is everything!!!

Praise and thanks be to God.

Dick Gillett